OPINION

BY RABEL AKHUND

AI as governance

MOST large companies today describe their AI strategy in practical terms. They identify a set of potential use cases, rank them by expected impact and launch pilots in the most promising areas. This is a sensible, often necessary, starting point. It allows organisations to build technical capability, develop internal confidence and observe how AI behaves in real operating environments.

Over time, however, a consistent pattern becomes visible. The organisations that move beyond experimentation are not the ones that simply expand their portfolio of use cases. They are the ones that treat early deployments as the foundation for a second phase, where AI begins to shape how work itself is organised, coordinated and governed. This distinction points to a more fundamental divide between delivering AI initiatives and shaping an AI strategy. The line is not drawn by spend, scale or technical prowess but by what the organisation treats as its central problem or identifies as its key points of friction.

The first phase is typically anchored in technology and marked by a certain amount of technical optimism. Models appear in discrete corners, for example, customer service, marketing, forecasting and compliance. Each deployment becomes a small island of capability, generating momentum and insight within its own boundaries. The second phase begins somewhere less fashionable, with the problems organisations have been living with for years. These are not innovation challenges but structural ones — decisions that take too long, information trapped in silos or processes that depend on a small number of individuals who 'just know how things are done', commercial teams that struggle to translate strategy into execution or compliance functions that spend more time assembling reports than managing risk.

When organisations begin to focus here, AI stops being a tool and starts becoming part of the operating and governance model, embedded in the way authority, accountability and coordination are designed. This carries particular weight in institutional environments like Pakistan's, where firms often operate within weak enforcement, informal practices and a heavy reliance on personal authority rather than formal systems. In such contexts, technology does more than improve efficiency. It reshapes how organisational power is exercised.

An AI system that screens contracts, flags regulatory exposure or prioritises customers is no longer merely software. It is performing a form of delegated judgement. It shapes what the organisation sees, what it ignores and what it acts upon. This is why the second phase of adoption is less about accumulation and more about alignment. Use cases, left to themselves, tend to perfect their own local worlds. Each function grows sharper, faster and more capable in isolation. The larger question is whether these sharpened parts begin to compose a shared way of working, a common logic of movement and response.

Pilots, in this light, take on a different character. They are no longer simply tests of technical possibility. They become quiet probes into the organisation's own readiness, its willingness to formalise judgement, to distribute accountability and to allow certain decisions to be carried by design rather than by habit. In this sense, pilots become as much governance exercises as technology trials. The organisations that are willing to institutionalise delegated judgement are the ones that will see the most optimum results. However, such delegation must be structured and in line with the organisation's own governance principles. In return, technology platforms must clearly feed back into the governance loop with advanced transparency showing where such delegated authority has been exercised.

> AI is reshaping authority.

Many boards still treat AI primarily as a technology topic, something to be managed by IT or digital teams. In practice, it increasingly functions closer to financial controls or legal authority. Systems that draft, filter or prioritise information are shaping corporate judgement in much the same way as policy frameworks and compliance regimes.

The question is no longer whether a model is technically accurate. It is whether the organisation is deliberately shaping the framework within which AI-informed decisions are formed and sustained, and this is a question of governance architecture rather than technology alone.

The strategic choice, then, is not whether to adopt AI. That has already been answered in the affirmative by competition and efficiency pressures. It is whether organisations take the step of building the frameworks that determine how AI-informed decisions are authorised, reviewed and sustained. In the end, it is not the machinery that endures but the form of the institution it leaves behind. ■

The writer is an international commercial lawyer and innovator.

BY ZARRAR KHUHRO

Phoenix in reverse

EVERY day, crowds gather outside the ruins of Gul Plaza. Every day, people wait for any word on the fate of their loved ones. They wait not for proof of life — no one survived — but for proof of death, for a chance to perhaps — somehow — identify the charred corpses and pieces of corpses, being brought out of the ashes.

They will be waiting a long time; such was the intensity of the blaze that the dead were rendered unrecognisable, their bodies charred black, their bones turned to ash. There is unreserved sorrow, there is eminently justified anger, and there is also that slim, singular glimmer of hope that is perhaps the only thing that sustains this city. And this hope comes not from the government (don't be silly!) but from the people that flow through this city like life-giving blood through veins, from those very Karachiites who — loud, disruptive and messy as we are — are the only ones to come to our aid. These are the ones who offered to rush into the blaze themselves, who dove into sewer lines to save a child, who will stop to help you get your car out of a ditch or change a flat tyre.

We see them outside Gul Plaza, serving free tea and food and even perhaps bringing blankets for those waiting in despair. We see them as 'posh' malls, like Atrium and Dolmen, offer to open up their spaces for Gul Plaza's retailers, with organisations like LadiesFund also stepping up to do the same, to name just a few.

We are also proud that Karachi is the birthplace of what the *Guinness Book of World Records* recognises as the world's largest volunteer ambulance service — the Edhi Foundation — which has grown and inspired countless other such organisations. But there's also a hint of bitterness in that pride because we know that the need for such volunteer services is due to a vacuum that the government cannot or will not fill. Cannot, because there are very real issues of capacity, resources and competence. We know this. We also know — as we are told ad nauseam after any such tragedy — that the real problem is Karachi's balkanised administration and dysfunctional divisions.

What we are never told is how to fix that, or whether there is even any intention of fixing it. Surely, by now the chief minister of Sindh, who has been in power for nearly nine continuous years, could have addressed this? Surely the energetic mayor of Karachi could have pushed for it? But instead, we are told that the fire safety report compiled by the KMC in 2024 was only presented to the CM a few days ago in the aftermath of Gul Plaza. Instead, we are treated to the spectacle of the Karachi mayor complaining about lack of 'enforcement' of existing laws and regulations without perhaps any awareness of who exactly is supposed to be doing the enforcement. Instead, we are told that the Sindh Building Control Authority is now going to crack down on errant buildings and builders, who have been told to get their fire safety act in gear in three days, as if the neglect of decades can be remedied in 72 hours.

Now the government has received a gift in the shape of Mustafa Kamal asking for Karachi to be made a federal territory, thus allowing the debate to seamlessly shift to the division of Sindh and conspiracies against the 18th Amendment. Fingers are pointed, insults and accusations exchanged and inaction is thus effectively masked under a cloak of righteous outrage. Nothing will change. We know this because we have been here before.

Let's go back to 2012, when the Baldia factory fire claimed nearly 300 lives. In response, the Sindh High Court set up a judicial commission which duly submitted a report highlighting failures in building codes, noting that the Factories Act, 1934, needed to be implemented. The Sindh Assembly also passed excellent legislation — the Sindh Occupational Safety and Health Act — mandating safety committees, regular inspections, fire safety training, etc. The Act was praised by the Supreme Court, which urged other provinces to adopt similar laws. They did. All stakeholders — a term we are oh-so-fond of — were brought on board, and factory owners, workers and government officials sat together to work out a plan to avoid such disasters in the future.

> There is a vacuum that the government cannot or will not fill.

And, believe it or not, some small progress was made; by the end of 2014, over 700 previously unregistered factories in Sindh were brought into the administrative framework. Task forces were made operational and defunct OSH centres across the province were reactivated. It didn't last; nothing good ever does here. From 2014 onwards, we saw that the laws were not being enforced, inspections remained ineffective due to a combination of short-staffing, political interference and corruption and, well, you know the rest. And if you don't, rest assured you're about to see a replay. ■

The writer is a journalist.
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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

Parties Act amended

ISLAMABAD: The President today [Jan 25] promulgated an ordinance amending the Political Parties Act, 1962. The ordinance, called the Political Parties (Amendment) Ordinance, 1976, has substituted Section 8 of the original Act relating to certain disqualifications for being a member of Parliament or Provincial Assemblies. The new Section 8 provides that a person who has at any time on or after September 20, 1971 been an office-bearer of a political party dissolved under Section 6, and has not resigned or publicly announced his dissociation before the party was declared dissolved, shall be disqualified from being a member of Parliament or a Provincial Assembly and being elected or chosen for a period of five years from the date of such dissolution. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by a correspondent,] about five lakh Pakistani professional, technical, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers will have job opportunities during 1976-1981 in the Middle East and … Gulf States which are humming with economic activity… . International surveys … indicate that the manpower needs of these … countries during these five years will be about 25 lakh expatriate workers.

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Currency racket

KARACHI: Two Deputy Assistant Controllers of the State Bank of Pakistan and three local business men have been sent up to the court of Mr Agha Sultan, Karachi Special Magistrate, on charges of complicity in a fraudulent exchange of foreign currency from the State Bank … to the tune of over a lakh of rupees. The accused are: Mr P.C. Chaco and Mr P. Fernandes of the State Bank … and Messrs Salim H. Mohammad, Iftikhar All Beg and Abdul Ghani, Directors of Messrs Tajar and Company.

The accused, it is alleged, were involved in a racket whereby large amounts of foreign currency were drawn from the State Bank on forged bills of entry purporting to have been made abroad. — Staff reporter

[As reported by a staff reporter in Karachi,] the latest addition to the homeless of Karachi is the Senior Superintendent of Police of the Pakistan capital, Mr M.A. Abdullah. On his posting … he was not allotted any house. He was living under private arrangement… . … Mr Abdullah has found refuge in the PAL Hotel at the Karachi Airport. He will now look after law and order in Karachi town from Drigh Road. At present the SSP has no telephone at his 'residence'.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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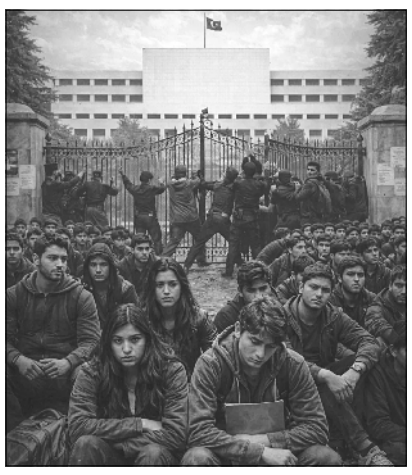
Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Glum youth waiting outside the system



A LITTLE while ago, I met a university graduate in Karachi whose story I found painfully familiar. He had done everything that modern Pakistani society tells its young people to do in order to be successful, but had remained unemployed and frustrated. In effect, he had remained largely invisible to the very system that claims to represent him. When I asked him how he viewed national politics, he paused for a moment before replying, almost apologetically: "They only remember us when they need numbers." There was no anger in his voice, no dramatic complaint. It was simply a statement of fact. And, it captured in one sentence the experience of millions of young Pakistanis.

The national political system has increasingly been disconnected from the realities, expectations and aspirations of the largest demographic group in the country. With over 60 per cent of the population under the age of 30, young people should naturally be shaping national priorities, influencing policy, and participating meaningfully in decision-making. Instead, they exist mostly on the margins of power. Young Pakistanis vote. They debate. They organise, campaign and mobilise, particularly online. Yet, their participation rarely translates into real influence where decisions are made.

Today's young Pakistanis grow up politically informed, but emotionally detached. They understand democratic jargon, like constitution, elections, representation, but experience little democratic substance in their everyday life.

Representation exists in form, but participation often remains symbolic. Political theorists describe this as a 'representation gap'.

For Pakistani youth, this gap defines how politics is perceived: distant, unresponsive and largely self-serving. Social media has emerged as the primary outlet for this frustration. It is where corruption is questioned, injustices are highlighted, and accountability is demanded. In many ways, digital platforms have become an alternative political space, one that allows expression without permission. But, digital participation, however vibrant, cannot replace structural reforms. When a political system consistently fails to respond to economic distress, it loses moral authority, especially among those who have invested the most in its promises.

Policy responses aimed at youth inclusion have so far been largely cosmetic. Youth programmes are announced without continuity. Consultations are held without decision-making authority. Advisory councils are formed without real power.

These initiatives generate headlines, but not confidence. The What makes the current moment particularly significant is that youth frustration today is informed. Young Pakistanis are globally exposed, digitally connected, and politically conscious. They compare governance standards, accountability mechanisms, and civic freedoms beyond national borders. Their criticism is not rebellion; it is awareness. History repeatedly shows that societies do not decline when young people question authority; they decline when the authorities refuse to listen.

The young in Pakistan are not rejecting democracy itself; they are rejecting the hollow version of it in which participation ends at elections and governance remains inaccessible. They seek inclusion beyond slogans, accountability beyond rhetoric, and leadership rooted in principles rather than personalities. Pakistan has to recognise the young as permanent stakeholders in the nation's future. It is time for the state to respond sincerely to the voices waiting outside the system.

Ghulam Rasool
Karachi

Restoring merit

THE Balochistan government recently announced multiple vacancies in the provincial assembly for positions in grades 16 and 17. These posts carry significant administrative and technical responsibilities that makes a fair and transparent recruitment process essential. In the past, such appointments were made through the Balochistan Public Service Commission (BPSC), an institution known for conducting competitive examinations. The involvement of BPSC provided confidence to applicants across the province that their abilities, not connections, would determine their success.

Unfortunately, this time the recruitment process has been assigned to a committee instead of BPSC. This change has raised serious concerns among the aspirants. Shifting the hiring authority away from an established and impartial commission undermines the principles of fairness and transparency. It also increases the risk of political influence, favouritism and many a compromised appointment. This is deeply troubling and poses a direct challenge to the integrity of the recruitment system.

Moreover, at a time when unemployment is high and educated youth are already struggling to find opportunities, any compromise on merit can have long-lasting negative effects. The credibility of public institutions depends on the trust of the people, and that trust weakens when recruitment processes are perceived as biased.

Ensuring merit-based hiring is crucial for building an efficient, capable and professional workforce. The government should reconsider its decision, and restore the recruitment process to BPSC, which will help safeguard transparency, maintain merit and guarantee that deserving candidates are selected fairly.

Prof Faheem Akhtar Gajani
Sohbatpur

An unfinished fight

THE ongoing month of January is observed globally as the Leprosy Awareness Month. It offers Pakistan an opportunity to reflect on a public health challenge that continues to persist quietly. Despite being entirely curable, leprosy remains present in Pakistan, largely affecting marginalised communities and those with limited access to healthcare. The continued appearance of new cases highlights gaps in early detection, awareness and sustained policy attention.

No individual shaped Pakistan's response to leprosy more profoundly than did Dr Ruth Pfau. As a result of her efforts, Pakistan achieved the World Health Organisation (WHO) target of eliminating leprosy as a public health problem in 1996.

However, elimination did not mean eradication. New cases continue to be detected each year, suggesting that transmission has not been completely interrupted. Underreporting remains a concern, driven by weak surveillance mechanisms, insufficient training at the primary healthcare level, and the enduring stigma that discourages patients from seeking timely care.

Honouring Dr Ruth Pfau's legacy requires more than symbolic remembrance; it calls for renewed institutional commitment. Strengthening early detection through primary healthcare, investing in active case finding in high-risk areas, and integrating leprosy services into routine surveillance are essential steps. Equally important is the need to address stigma through sustained public awareness campaigns.

Pakistan must focus on rehabilitation and social reintegration for individuals living with leprosy-related disabilities. Medical treatment alone cannot undo the social and economic consequences of delayed diagnosis. Coordinated efforts involving health, social welfare and labour sectors are necessary to restore livelihoods and ensure long-term inclusion. Diseases persist when policy commitment weakens and systems fall silent. Pakistan's success in controlling leprosy once demonstrated what sustained leadership and compassion could achieve.

Preserving that honoured legacy now depends on whether or not the country chooses to reaffirm its responsibility to those still living at the margins of care.

Prof (Dr) Atta Ur Rehman
Karachi

Academic inequality

CHILDREN from low-income families are almost always confined to a particular category of schools, while many middle-class parents hesitate to have their children enrolled in these institutions. At the other end of the spectrum, students of the so-called elite schools often grow up with a strong sense of superiority. The three-tier mechanism is surely not accidental; it has been produced and reinforced by a system that increasingly resembles a caste-like hierarchy.

Education is one space that should be uniform in purpose and spirit. Regardless of location or resources, the aim of every school should be the same: to educate. Yet, in Pakistan, differences begin with uniforms and extend to buildings, facilities, and, most critically, fees. Schools now compete not in academic quality, but in luxury, exclusivity and branding.

In South Korea, school buildings are so similar in design and structure that no branding is required to identify them as schools. This architectural uniformity reflects a deeper principle: education is a public good, not a status symbol.

When children are segregated so early in their lives on the basis of socioeconomic class, the notions and perceptions of these individuals harden as they move into adulthood. Unless serious efforts are made to strengthen public schools and regulate private education, our schooling system will just continue to reproduce inequality rather than challenging it.

Zehra Kashif
Karachi

▶ **THALASSEMIA CARE:** The Kech Thalassemia Care Centre (KTCC) in Turbat is facing significant challenges to remain fully functional. There is a constant need for fresh blood donations, and the cost of iron-chelation medicines and medical equipment is very high. Many families come from poor backgrounds and cannot afford the travel or the treatment their children need to survive. The government should provide a permanent grant to ensure that no child goes without blood or medicine.
Abdul Qadeer
Turbat

▶ **UNHYGIENIC TANDOORS:** The level of hygiene at many of the tandoors in Peshawar are deeply concerning. The dough is often made on dusty floors. In some instances, workers even step over the dough or place their feet near it during preparation. As such, observing the process for even a few minutes is enough to discourage one from ever buying bread. This negligence poses a serious public health risk, as unhygienic food can lead to gastrointestinal infections and several other diseases. The relevant authorities should conduct regular inspections. Clean hands, uniforms, gloves, hygienic flooring as well as safe dough-handling practices must be strictly made mandatory to ensure that citizens have access to clean and safe food.
Muhammad Azhar Ud Din
Peshawar

▶ **SUBSTANDARD SNACKS:** Low-quality snacks, most papadums, are sold outside schools, on the streets, and in local markets in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) without licensing, inspection or quality control. They are often prepared under unhygienic conditions and contain harmful substances that pose serious health risks to children. Cases of stomach disorders, vomiting, diarrhoea, weakness and loss of appetite have been reported among children consuming such products. It is high time for the government to urgently regulate locally produced snacks, ban harmful chemicals, prohibit sales near schools, and launch public awareness campaigns to protect children's health.
Prof Syed Imran Haider Shah
Haripur

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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